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Hardy: John Grierson: A Documentary Biography

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In The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), Elizabeth Sussex writes: "Probably nothing that might be described as a movement in the arts has produced less major art than the British documentary movement." And in this valuable composite history, based on interviews with principal figures of that movement, including Grierson, she provides evidence from Grierson's talented protégés and colleagues that the reason for this "rise and fall" of British documentary was simply John Grierson himself. Of all the pioneers in cinema history, John Grierson is the one most likely to cause problems for the biographer, historian, and critic. He taught us to use the motion picture camera to record the world honestly—all visual communication is in his debt—and yet he imposed such a didactic overlay on his films that he frequently deprived them of the honesty on which he insisted.

John Grierson was the father of the documentary film as we know it in the English-speaking world, and when he was active in England, between 1928 and 1939, as head of the film units of the Empire Marketing Board and later the General Post Office, the movement did indeed rise and flourish. When he left in 1939 to pursue other callings, it faltered and fell. Grierson was a man with the right idea, at the right time, in the right place, a man of intellect, industry, and influence. Under his stewardship the British documentary filmmakers produced about 300 films, and even if Elizabeth Sussex is correct in asserting that this is not major art, we must remember that the outstanding films from this vast output are milestones in the history of nonfiction film. Grierson's ideas have influenced virtually every nonfiction filmmaker, but he is not responsible for those films that make the documentary film synonymous with dullness. That is the fault only of those filmmakers who lack the imagination to make what he called a "creative treatment of actuality."

Ordinarily, John Grierson's writing is not pithy, so this definition of the documentary film is all the more incisive for its brief and balanced emphasis on imagination and reality. He believed that film had the power to clarify, synthesize, simplify, popularize, and even to evangelize. He saw it as an extension of the educational process, but not as an art. And that limited view, it seems to me, is where he made the crucial error that, more than any other, led to the decline of the movement he founded.

The basic force behind the documentary film was

social, not aesthetic, but Grierson did not overlook cinematography, editing, or sound. He simply believed that ideas came first and that cinematic form would follow naturally, perhaps even mystically, since in all his writings on the genre (most of which are collected in Forsyth Hardy's *Grierson on Documentary*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), there is virtually no comment at all on formal elements. Convinced that film was a medium of education and persuasion, Grierson devoted his exasperating, restless persistence—a missionary zeal that fit naturally a man who preached in Scottish churches as a student—to the task of convincing others that film could and should be used to awaken people around the world to the necessity of social progress. A vision of such social emphasis and international implication was bound to get him into trouble, and it did.

Grierson was also a rebel, not just against the entertainment film (which, in fact, he enjoyed personally and even produced later in life) but, more important, against the insularity of British life. Elizabeth Sussex asked him: "How important was the British Documentary Movement?" and he replied:

If I were going to talk about the thing that gives me the biggest kick, looking back on documentary, it was the absolute discipline of the documentary people in the thirties. Nobody stepped out of line, because they knew that divided we would perish but together we could stand. And we were disciplined, of course, for a purpose. We were *engagé*, and the first thing about being *engagé*, is discipline. [p. 193]

Such enthusiasm seemed to him hardly British, yet Grierson was committed to what he called "life on the doorstep," with the belief that the more we all understand that life, whether it be on the doorsteps of Glasgow or Calcutta or San Francisco, the better this world would be. Later such idealism would unjustly have him branded a communist, but it was that sort of thinking, and the discipline to put it into practice, that led him to conceive the British documentary film movement.

There is now no better place to examine the sources of this commitment than in Forsyth Hardy's latest book. The ambiguity in the subtitle is deliberate, for Hardy's is not a critical biography. A lifelong colleague of Grierson's ("a strong positive influence in my life"), he believes in the Grierson myth, which in part he helped to create with *Grierson on Documentary*. He clearly documents the facts of Grierson's life, but I wish that he might have been more creative and critical in this treatment of actuality, even perhaps more *engagé*. Unfortunately, we must be content with Hardy's hagiography, for the full-scale biography expected from Jack C. Ellis will, Ellis reports, appear later this year in the "references and resources" series published by G. K. Hall & Company. Grierson was not a saint, as a critical biography would in all likelihood have shown, but Hardy's book is useful for establishing the outline of his life.

John Grierson was born on April 26, 1898, in the Scottish village of Deanston, the son of a stern but likable schoolmaster father and a radical feminist mother. His early education was based on what he called the "false dream" of the nineteenth century—"that if only everyone had the individualist ideals that education taught, free men in a free society, each in independent and educated judgment, would create a civilization such as the world had never seen before." He skeptically rejected this idyllic vision, and by the time he was 16, which also marked the outbreak of the First World War, he volunteered for the Navy rather than accepting a scholarship at the University of Glasgow. So eager was he to enlist that he lied about his age by one year, and in joining he affirmed the Grierson family's long link with the sea and its living influence on him. (His final wish, in fact, was that the urn of his ashes be placed in the sea off the Old Head of Kinsale, beyond the outer turbot mark, so that the fishermen would not bring it up in their nets and curse him for his thoughtlessness.)

Grierson served as a telegrapher on a minesweeper, living in a somewhat isolated and unseen world of sound. This was dangerous service, but he managed to study 4 hours each day and in 4 years completed the equivalent of the university's first-year reading list. In 1919 he entered the University of Glasgow and, along with many other veterans, was impatient with his professors' lack "of any understanding whatever of the psychological gulf a life on active service can create between a service and civilian life." He was the star performer of the University Fabian Society and led the New University Labour Club. It was inevitable that a man of his family background, values, and education—as well as his own humanist inclination—would take up the cause of the Clydeside dock workers, a sympathy recalled later in his films in the memorable images of hard-working people. At the university, he read widely and wrote avidly. Many of Grierson's later essays are tedious in their crusty egocentrism, but they are also enthusiastically utilitarian and aggressively humanist. His philosophy was, thus, purposive: he had been taught at home to go out and help his fellow man, and he believed in pragmatic approaches to improving man's existence. He wrote: "Life is in the beginning and in the end cruel, a struggle for existence at all costs." In retrospect, it seems natural that Grierson would devote his life to preaching, of one kind or another, for the three virtues that he expounded in sermons during his summer holidays in Scottish churches were faith, hard thinking, and activity. This belief in self-discipline was balanced by a compelling sense of humor and love of the good life, so while Grierson may appear to epitomize the Scottish Presbyterian fundamentalist, he was also and always a man of the world. He was fond of whiskey, food, the company of lively men and women, ribald stories, and late nights, and his one personal passion was his collection of Krazy Kat cartoon films. For Grierson, it was Chaplin who first sparked his interest in films, an interest that was characteristically less cinematic than political,

for he found Chaplin's tramp an irresistible metaphor for the struggling lower classes.

Grierson graduated with honors and was awarded a Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial fellowship which enabled him to travel through the United States and study what he considered to be the related subjects of public opinion and social psychology. By studying immigrants, he quickly came to the conclusion that the dramatic form of yellow-journalism papers such as Hearst's was the most important factor in converting newly arrived Europeans to the American way of life. While living in Chicago he met Carl Sandburg, one of his idols; he then moved to New York, in 1925, where he met another, Walter Lippmann, then editor of the *New York World* and already well known for his book *Public Opinion* (1922). Lippman argued that the facts of daily life had to be dramatized in terms of their human consequences if they were to have an impact on public consciousness; moreover, he saw the potential to fulfill this concept in film. (This notion might have been one of the influences on the "poster films" that Grierson later produced in England.) Although Grierson's father had actually introduced him to film many years before, Grierson credits Lippmann with turning him in the direction of film as a career. What really impressed him was the potential in the deliberate use of film for social change.

Cinema now became his dominant interest, and in addition to the report on cinema that he prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation (he always prepared "reports" after trips), he wrote film criticism for the *New York Sun*. He closely analyzed *Potemkin* and introduced the American and British public to it through his writing and speaking engagements. He met Robert Flaherty, and in the legendary review of *Moana*, Flaherty's second film, he first used the term *documentary*. Later he had misgivings about its value to the movement that went forward under its name: "Documentary is a clumsy description but let it stand." For those of us who regard the documentary as one approach to the larger genre of the nonfiction film, it is indeed a clumsy description.

After two-and-a-half years in the United States, Grierson returned to Great Britain, undecided about choosing a career in journalism or cinema. But when he met Stephen Tallents, head of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), his direction was set for life. Tallents commissioned him to prepare a series of reports on the uses of film in other countries, primarily France and Germany. Later Grierson showed films to the EMB bureaucrats concerned with improving the quality and marketing of British products. From the earliest days of his career he enthusiastically promoted motion pictures, and on May 15, 1928, Grierson was appointed assistant film officer of the EMB and went to work on the film project that eventually became *Drifters* (1929). He supervised the production and the cinematography on location in the North Sea, and returned to London to edit the film himself. He had only a theoretical experience of film

editing, but a thorough knowledge of Russian formalist aesthetics (after all, he boasted, he had taken *Potemkin* apart and put it back together again—figuratively speaking, of course), and he knew what he wanted. Margaret Taylor, a young film editor who later became his wife, helped him realize his vision, although he took full credit for the film. To the student of film editing, *Drifters* shows Grierson's fine understanding of Eisenstein. He must have been very proud when it was shown publicly for the first time in London on a program with *Potemkin*, with Eisenstein himself in the audience. *Drifters*, an unpretentious film about the herring fishing industry, was a success with audiences and critics, and it impressed Stephen Tallents and his associates at the Empire Marketing Board. Grierson convinced Tallents that the EMB film unit should be expanded, and with this move the British documentary movement entered its infancy.

Now Grierson made the decision that was to influence the nature, scope, and achievement of that movement. He knew he was a producer, not a director (even though *Drifters* is a film of which any beginner would be proud), and he persuaded Tallents to establish at the EMB a small school of filmmakers that would pursue his theories. Grierson was soon joined by Basil Wright, Arthur Elton, Paul Rotha, Edgar Anstey, and many others whose names later became well known in the movement. (Grierson's eye for young talent was not infallible, however, for he could never understand or be comfortable with the work of Humphrey Jennings.) But this group of enthusiastic young filmmakers was hardly yet a movement. Money and facilities were scarce, but Grierson had a clear conception of the social uses of film and where he wanted to go; with Tallent's support, a program of films began to emerge in the early 1930s.

Grierson traveled throughout Great Britain, talking to audiences everywhere about the work of the EMB and showing films from many countries. He commissioned Robert Flaherty to make *Industrial Britain* (1933), an uneven accomplishment that provides a rare opportunity to study the work of the two nonfiction film pioneers on a single project. Closer to the Grierson ideal were such films as *Grantown Trawler* (1934), *Coal Face* (1936), and *Aero-Engine* (1933). Although he was fulfilling his desire to make films of ordinary people, to bring the British Empire alive to its subjects and to the rest of the world, he was frustrated in his quest for cinematic social realism. His attempts to deal fully with certain subjects were constrained by the needs of the government that sponsored the films, and Grierson realized that the documentary film, as he envisioned it, could not really be "an instrument of the working class." Concurrent with this insight—and Grierson was not a Marxist—the economic situation worsened, and the life of the EMB was ended officially on September 30, 1933. But Sir Stephen Tallents (he had been knighted in 1932) moved over to the General Post Office (GPO), taking Grierson with him, thus ensuring the continuation of government documentary filmmaking in Great Britain.

At the GPO film unit—in what might appear to have been an unlikely and unimaginative atmosphere for creative film production—the British movement continued and prospered. Grierson and his associates turned from economic concerns to subjects drawn from communications, industry, and technology. Along with their new support, they had the satisfaction of continuing their experiments with sound, the involvement of other artists such as W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten, and the opportunity to develop techniques in color, graphics, and animation. Among the memorable films of those early years are Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), Stuart Legg's *B.B.C.: The Voice of Britain* (1935), and Basil Wright's and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* (1936). Of course, there was resistance if not opposition in the larger film community. The commercial film trade resented the economical production of films by a government agency; the newly formed British Film Institute had little influence, but it feared competition from the system of nontheatrical distribution that Grierson had organized; and the Conservative party was suspicious of the political orientation of the GPO films. Here, as throughout this biography, Hardy is particularly sensitive to this issue of opposition to the movement, but he accepts Grierson's position without much question. He further avoids the problem by not analyzing or evaluating the films that sparked the opposition in the first place. Grierson wisely countered these attempts to destroy his concept of the documentary film by continuing to produce exemplary films. His support, output, and facilities grew, and he was especially fortunate in having the imaginative sound-recording experiments under the guidance of Alberto Cavalcanti, the Brazilian-born director whose *Rien que les heures* and *En rade* were already famous in avant-garde European film circles.

By 1936, Grierson could be proud of his achievements. He had established, however modestly, the principle of responsible government support for imaginative documentary filmmaking. He had founded a school for the training of young filmmakers. He had worked energetically to build a responsive audience for British films at home, in the dominions, and elsewhere. At the same time, he had raised important questions about government sponsorship and about propaganda. The issue of propaganda is less explosive today than it was in the mid-1930s, when Goebbels was its master, but thinking people in Great Britain and elsewhere were concerned about it. All this was the work of a pioneer and if it had its virtues it also had its faults. Some new elements were no longer as good as they once appeared as was the case with other pioneering developments in film. Today we are also more demanding in what we expect a nonfiction film to tell us about a social situation, and it is in this area—content, not form—that the GPO films appear sometimes to be weak. Why, for one example, does *Night Mail*, the GPO masterpiece, fail to express what was then the well-known discontent among post-office workers? Why does it fail to criticize faults in the postal system? Why does it transform the Postal Special into a force of ethereal beauty

and forget the people who sweat at low wages and in poor working conditions to make it function so efficiently? (We know, of course, that Auden, Spender, and Lewis wrote poetry that exalted the beauty of machines, but why, in the creation of such work, did they forget the dignity of man?) The answers to these questions will not be found in Hardy but rather in Elizabeth Sussex's book and in other studies of the nonfiction film. Hardy is simply but genuinely too impressed with Grierson to imagine asking the questions.

Certainly, Grierson had to contend with the anomaly that state resources were being used to make films that sometimes indirectly criticized the manner in which the state dealt with social, industrial, and economic problems. He did not overlook the problems, but in regarding the survival of the documentary film movement as his first priority, he sometimes overlooked its critics. His emphasis on positive achievements and progress created a public relations atmosphere in which real social progress became secondary to a favorable representation of the institution or program being depicted. Ironically, Grierson was capable of sophisticated dialectic, but he eschewed it in these films, mindful of the political high-wire act he was masterminding and, indeed, of his own future. Hardy pays virtually no attention to Grierson's sense of self-preservation, but it is evident that it was among his strongest motivations.

The GPO film unit itself expanded, venturing into color and animation with Len Lye and Norman MacLaren, into international affairs (*The Defence of Madrid*), and into frequent meetings with European filmmakers and screenings of their films. In 1937, in the midst of this expansion and success, Grierson left the GPO and Alberto Cavalcanti became its supervising producer. Hardy does not discuss the sources of Grierson's restlessness and need to move on at this and later critical junctures in his career. But Grierson's social idealism, distrust of cinema as an art, and personal unhappiness (especially the heavy drinking) must have been among them.

The precise distinctions between the film production at the GPO film unit during and after Grierson's tenure are less apparent than three general changes. First, the technical experimentation increased; second, the films took a wider and livelier look at British society; and, third, the documentary film became more a form in itself, as the films became more surely grounded in cinematic properties as well as in ideological causes. For Grierson, too, a new phase was to begin, for he had been invited to make a survey of film developments in Canada, the country in which he would achieve his greatest accomplishments, and he seemed to like nothing more than to travel to a faraway place and tell people how to make films his way.

Grierson traveled throughout Canada, met most of the people prominent in the nation's affairs, and wrote a report critical of the Canadian government film effort. Eventually, this report resulted in the establishment of the National Film Board (NFB), to which Grierson was appointed temporary commissioner for 6 months beginning in October 1939. This was extended to August 1941,

but not without high-level government controversy over his policies and methods of operation; finally, he was confirmed as permanent commissioner. At the NFB, as at the EMB and GPO film units, he encouraged experimentation, young talent (including many women), widespread distribution of films, and the participation of famous filmmakers from around the world. Grierson resisted parochialism and provincialism, using the series *Canada Carries On* and *The World in Action* to emphasize Canadian achievements. He was unusually sensitive to the Anglo-Saxon sense of superiority in Canada and insisted that NFB films be provided with both French and English soundtracks, a decision that won him larger audiences as well as more critics in the government. He was in this, as in many of his day-to-day attitudes and policies, a man very much ahead of his time. And when one considers that he was a government official, his stature as a leader only increases.

During the Second World War, Grierson served for some time as general manager of the Canadian War-time Information Board while continuing his duties at the National Film Board. He lectured across the country, laying the foundations for the information service by awakening Canadians to the things that united their vast and lonely country. He was so successful that when the chairman of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation resigned, he proposed that Grierson succeed him. But Grierson declined in the belief that adding control of broadcasting to the control he already had of information and film would have been too much.

Grierson resigned his NFB post in November 1945, at which time it was an organization of over 800 people, announcing that he was going on to make films on international themes. His leadership of the NFB had been impressive both because of the size of the organization he had built and because of the quantity and quality of its films. He returned to England with the satisfaction of having inspired yet another group of filmmakers. Today the National Film Board of Canada continues as a successful production organization and the living embodiment, along with film units around the world, of Grierson's vision.

He had received several American offers of major posts but the international idea dominated his thinking and he envisioned a truly international exchange of filmmaking talent to support, among other things, the objectives and activities of the United Nations. But his internationalism and his work at the NFB came under the investigation of Canadian authorities who were looking into communist activities. The enemies that Grierson had made in Ottawa through his arrogant enthusiasm for film production now brought out their grievances. All this hurt his fundraising efforts for the International Film Associates and seriously diminished the morale of those who were to join the effort. But the cruelest blow to his pride and reputation was the United States government's refusal to renew his visa to reenter the country. Hardy treats this episode with respect for what must have been a painful and humiliating experience, but he does not really go

into it sufficiently, even in his epilogue ("The Right of the Prophet"), where he tries to come to some balanced assessment of Grierson's life and achievement. We never know if Grierson fought the State Department decision but his work then and later with UNESCO must have annoyed the vigilant bureaucrats in Washington who saw threats everywhere in those dark days before Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations.

Nonetheless, Grierson moved ahead, first to Paris as UNESCO's Director of Mass Communications and Public Information, then back to London to the Crown Film Unit (CFI) where he would once again be in overall charge of the planning, production, and distribution of government films. In 1939, the GPO Film Unit went under the supervision of the Ministry of Information and in 1940 it was renamed the CFI. Grierson was called back, for his administrative skills more than for his experience as an imaginative producer. Even though this frustrated him (he left CFI within 2 years), he campaigned tirelessly within the unit and within the larger Central Office of Information for policies that would restore social purpose and imaginative craftsmanship to British documentary. But when the Conservative party won the 1951 election, it made a series of cuts in the government's information services, among them the Crown Film Unit. By then, Grierson had already quit, but this was yet another defeat for Grierson and for the documentary film, if, indeed, it is possible to separate them.

He accepted a position of executive producer for Group 3, one of the cooperative film production enterprises receiving loans of government money through the National Film Finance Corporation, and for the first time in his life was involved in the making of fiction films for paying audiences. Although this would appear to contradict much of what he had been saying and doing for 20 years, Hardy offers reasons that help to explain it, the most persuasive of which is that Grierson enjoyed being part of a nationwide effort to revitalize the film industry. The hard truth is that he also needed a job. Most of the Group 3 films were light comedies, designed not only to get the studio craftspersons back to work but also to get the audiences back into the theaters. Grierson liked the work because he liked comedy, but when he had the chance to make a serious film about life in a mining community, he was able to draw both on his own memories of growing up in a depression and on his lifelong commitment to films based on actuality. *The Brave Don't Cry* was praised around the world, and it was to become the most widely shown of all the Group 3 films with the exception of *The Conquest of Everest*. By 1954, the Group 3 experiment had not proven to be profitable and Grierson left. In the same year, he was honored at the Edinburgh Film Festival with a dinner to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the documentary film. He was at a critical juncture in his career, but instead of going forward, either into English film work or out into the dominions, he went home to Scotland, drawn no doubt by the thought of rest (he had been sick off and on for several years) and by the hope of some revitalization. Also, on the practical side, Scotland

was one of the few places in the United Kingdom where he had not helped to establish a native film service.

Since government-sponsored filmmaking was ended in Scotland, as well as in the rest of Great Britain, a group of industries that had something to gain from documentary films formed the awkwardly named, temporary Films of Scotland Committee and chose Grierson as its head. There was nothing nominal or temporary about Grierson's service, even though the financing was always minimal in comparison with that at his disposal in Canada and London. But he accepted the diminished scale of operations, brought to it all of his vast knowledge and experience, and within 5 years one of its films, *Seawards the Great Ships*, a study of the Scottish shipbuilding industry, had received an Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Grierson may have gone home to work, but he did not go home for good, and he continued to travel widely, especially to the major film festivals (Cannes, Venice, Cork, Oberhausen—the documentary festival—in addition to Edinburgh), where often as not he was either president of the entire festival or chairperson or member of the jury.

In Scotland Grierson became fascinated with television and produced *This Wonderful World*. He selected and edited the film excerpts, wrote the commentary, and introduced the program which ran for 10 years in Scotland; he seems to have been as successful with this enterprise as Alistair Cooke was in this country with *Omnibus*. With this program, Grierson was at his best, talking of things that interested him from around the world and showing parts of films that he had culled from his visits to the festivals. Although he said he was not impressed with the ratings (*This Wonderful World* was one of the top programs on Scottish television), the success must have given him some satisfaction. After all, it was in his native land, and it represented a fight back from the slump of the few preceding years. And now there was other recognition of his work. In 1961 he was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In 1962 he was invited to visit the United States, and when his visa application was approved without incident, he went happily. His principal invitation was from the University of North Carolina, where, one morning during breakfast, he convinced Governor Terry Sanford to establish the North Carolina Film Board. He spoke at Columbia University and at the Museum of Modern Art. Later he returned to Canada where he was acclaimed on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the National Film Board. To honor his life's achievement, the Films of Scotland Committee produced *I Remember, I Remember*, a personal film in which Grierson told the story of his work.

In 1969, at the age of 70, Grierson was appointed professor at McGill University in Montreal. Arriving in the midst of the student revolution, he quickly became a campus hero for his outspoken views, and his class, planned for 200 students, actually enrolled 700 young men and women eager to hear his witty, iconoclastic views about the necessity of linking social protest with social progress. And, inevitably, he tangled with his col-

league, the late Marshall McLuhan, whom Grierson felt was addling students' minds. Grierson said: "Who gives a goddam for the 8mm revolution if it is going to let loose on us *the 8mm mind*." After McGill, Grierson maintained an active schedule of work, including a demanding trip to India to help assess its filmmaking programs, but his health had been declining and after a short illness, he died on February 19, 1972.

In their brief *Studies in Documentary*, Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier of the British Film Institute assess the British documentary film movement in a very limited way: "The importance of the documentary movement lies, not in the quality of individual films, but in the impact it had in general on the British cinema." That seems particularly shortsighted in view of the influence that John Grierson had around the world in establishing national film movements and in influencing individual directors as diverse as Joris Ivens and Pare Lorentz. But it is fashionable, especially in England, to dismiss the work of Grierson and his colleagues, as it seems equally prevalent in this country to overlook the work of Willard Van Dyke, Helen Grayson, and others. To be sure, Grierson's endless theories can be reduced to some salient principles, but his written work only suggests how compelling his personal presence must have been, how persuasive and protective he was with young filmmakers, and how tireless he was in the service of the documentary idea.

The problem with Mr. Hardy's excellent book is that he deals clearly and evenly with John Grierson's life without ever revealing that life. He believes in the Grierson myth. He avoids critical comment on the films that Grierson produced. He is sometimes careless about providing dates so it would be troublesome, for instance, to construct a chronology from the information that he provides, but he is an expert on the subject and writes with that assurance as well as with the chatty familiarity that we might expect from Grierson's old friend. This, then, is both a personal memoir and an official biography, useful for what it provides, tantalizing for what it suggests.

I do not agree with English critics such as Sussex, Lovell, and Hillier who all suggest that the British documentary movement is due for a complete reassessment. That begs the issue. The social issues are now largely outmoded, the films do not reveal a definite aesthetic impulse, and there is too much diversity in a movement that includes the work of Harry Watt, Humphrey Jennings, and Len Lye. The good films are still worth seeing, and the lesser ones, as always, demonstrate why they deserve to be shelved. But one thing remains constant in documentary film from 1927 to 1972: John Grierson. In his 1950 manifesto on Free Cinema, Lindsay Anderson wrote: "Documentary should not be—it certainly need not be—synonymous with dullness. It should be one of the most exciting and stimulating of contemporary forms. After all, the cinema started with it." John Grierson would in all likelihood have taken many pages to have said just that, but he couldn't have said it any better, and those filmmakers who are guilty of making the documentary synonymous with dullness are not in any way his heirs.



